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Seventy-fifth Season 2025–26

The Westchester Chamber Music Society



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The Westchester Chamber Music Society (WCMS)
is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization

Sunday, November 9, 2025
Congregation Emanu-El of Westchester
Rye, New York

The Westchester Chamber Music Society
presents

CUARTETO LATINOAMERICANO

(Final World Tour)

Saúl Bitrán, *violin*

Arón Bitrán, *violin*

Javier Montiel, *viola*

Álvaro Bitrán, *cello*



Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887-1959)

String Quartet No. 17 (1957)

Allegro ma non troppo

Lento

Scherzo Allegro vivace

Allegro vivace con fuoco

George Gershwin (1898-1937)

Lullaby

Astor Piazzola (1921-1992)

Four for Tango

Intermission

Samuel Barber (1910-1981)

Adagio for Strings, Op. 11

Antonin Dvořák (1841-1904))

String Quartet in F Major, Op. 96 ("American")

Allegro ma non troppo

Lento

Molto vivace

Finale: Vivace ma non troppo

*A wine & cheese reception with the musicians will follow the performance.
We thank Aries Fine Wines & Spirits for their generous donation of wine.*

About this Performance

Cuarteto Latinoamericano is a string quartet from Mexico. Since its founding in 1981, the quartet has toured in Europe, the Americas, Israel, China, Japan, and New Zealand. They have premiered over 100 works written for them. The members of Cuarteto Latinoamericano are the three Bitrán brothers—violinists Saúl and Arón, and cellist Álvaro—along with the violist Javier Montiel. Cuarteto Latinoamericano was the quartet-in-residence at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh from 1987 until 2008.

Saúl Bitrán, *first violin*, is a devoted pedagogue. Many of his former students populate some of the world's leading orchestras and conservatories. He was an associate professor at Carnegie Mellon University from 1987 to 2008 and teaches regularly at numerous music festivals.

Bitrán is a *magna cum laude* graduate of the Samuel Rubin Academy of Music in Tel Aviv, Israel, where he studied under the tutelage of Yair Kless. Currently, Bitrán divides his time between Mexico City and Boston.

Arón Bitrán, *second violin*, has been a soloist with the main orchestras in Latin America. He has been a full-time professor at the National Conservatory and the Nacional University in México City and has taught master classes in many universities in the USA and Latin America. Several of his former students are principal players in México's main orchestras and chamber music groups. Bitrán has edited two books on learning to play the violin based on Mexican traditional music.

Javier Montiel, *cello*, teaches at Universidad Autonoma de Puebla and Vida y Movimiento in Mexico City. Other activities include composing and arranging. His composition "*Variations on Paganini's 24 Caprice*" was the first work dedicated to Cuarteto Latinoamericano; composed in 1982 and still a favorite encore. He has also composed several works for viola and piano, cello and piano, a piece for saxophone quartet, as well as works for chamber ensemble and a concerto for viola and strings. Montiel regularly gives a seminar on the music of The Beatles, based on their best songs from 1962 to 1970.

In 2000 he was honored with the "Mozart" Medal and in 2007 the Silver Medal from Instituto Nacional de Bellas Artes for the 25th anniversary of Cuarteto Latinoamericano.

Álvaro Bitrán, *cello*, started playing the cello at the age of seven and concluded his formal studies at Indiana University under the guidance of Janos Starker. Recent performances have included New York's Carnegie Hall, Washington's Kennedy Center, and Milan's Teatro Alla Scala.

His recordings (more than 100 in all) have received several prizes. Álvaro Bitrán is regularly invited to play as soloist with some of the major orchestras in North and South America.

Álvaro Bitrán is firmly committed to the creation of new music for his instrument and has premiered and recorded many new works dedicated to him. He has released five solo CD's featuring new music

by Latin American composers, as well as traditional repertoire. He has devoted much energy to teaching and is responsible for the development of an entire generation of cellists in Mexico. Bitrán teaches at the National Conservatory, UNAM, and Ollin Yolitzli, all in Mexico City. He plays a cello built in 1817 by Martin Stoss in Vienna.



Program Notes
by Joshua Berrett, Ph.D.

Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887-1959)
String Quartet No. 17 (1957)

Heitor Villa-Lobos was Brazil's foremost composer of the 20th century. His output was prodigious, covering music in virtually every genre, from opera and ballet to symphonies, concertos, and chamber music; his solo piano music caught the attention of the legendary Artur Rubinstein early on.

His earliest lessons were from his father, an amateur cellist. Upon his father's death in 1899, the young Heitor, then only 12, began making his living by playing cello in cafes and restaurants. Eight years later found him at the Instituto Nacional de Musica in Rio de Janeiro, where he received formal training in music theory and composition. But especially transformative were the years 1912-1915, when he undertook expeditions into Brazil's interior, collecting a treasure trove of indigenous music. Its impact on him was enormous.

This has everything to do with his often improvisatory style, in that much of his music is animated by the spirit of the *chôros*—something he described as representing “a new form of musical composition in which a synthesis is made of different types of Brazilian, Indian, and popular music, reflecting in its fundamental elements, the rhythm and characteristic melodies of the people.” And speaking of synthesis, probably best known to the world are his nine *Bachianas Brasileiras*—a unique fusion of J.S. Bach counterpoint with indigenous Brazilian elements—particularly the passionate *Bachianas Brasileiras No. 5* for soprano and eight cellos.

String Quartet No. 17 of 1957 is the last one Villa-Lobos wrote. It exemplifies a refinement of technique tending toward the abstract, while incorporating many of the stylistic features just mentioned. Included as well are some deeply affecting cello solos. The opening *Allegro ma non troppo* is *sui generis*, departing from the norm of a

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sonata form with exposition, development, recapitulation, coda. It instead approximates a ternary form, A-B-A, followed by an extended coda. Aside from the contrapuntal writing and occasional hints of Ravel, the movement is striking for the predominance of eighth-note triplets. This is a feature foreshadowing the *chôros*-inspired haunting *Lento* second movement and in turn harks back to triplet patterns in the opening Aria (Cantilena) of *Bachianas Brasileiras* No. 5.

The *Scherzo Allegro vivace* again breaks with tradition by being in duple 6/8 time, and stressing triple patterns. In its closing measures, Villa-Lobos injects a delightful touch of humor with a series of pizzicatos. The finale, marked *Allegro vivace con fuoco*, once again breaks with convention. It consists essentially of three unrelated sections, with a partial reprise of section one. A recall of part of the slow movement helps unify the entire composition, and most moving are the passages Villa-Lobos has written in the high register of the cello, the beloved instrument of his youthful days.

George Gershwin (1898-1937)

Lullaby

In a sense, George Gershwin needs no introduction. He has long been immortalized thanks to his Broadway songs co-written with his brother Ira, and works like *Rhapsody in Blue*, *Concerto in F*, *An American in Paris*, and *Porgy and Bess*.

Lullaby is a short piece for string quartet from around 1919 or 1920. Ira has recalled that “it was played . . . at a number of private musicales of his many musician friends before—sometimes after—they’d get down to the more serious business of classical quartets and quintets. I attended three of these intimate sessions and could see and hear that ‘Lullaby’ was invariably welcomed.” Yet the piece remained unknown to the larger public until the early 1960’s, when the harmonica virtuoso Larry Adler performed an arrangement of it. The first public performance of it as a string quartet dates from October 1967, when the Juilliard String Quartet played it at the Library of Congress.

Ira once characterized *Lullaby* as “charming and kind.” Working with two themes, the piece is very much in the *dolce* and *semplice* mode as it gently fuses features of Debussy, the syncopation of ragtime, and touches of the blues.

Astor Piazzola (1921-1992)

Four for Tango

The life and legacy of Astor Piazzola embodies much of the multicultural richness and universality of music of the 20th century. His name is synonymous with the tango, or more accurately, “nuevo tango,” a unique fusion of Argentina’s folk music, jazz, and polyphonic writing harking back to J.S. Bach. He was born in 1921 to Italian immigrant parents in Mar del Plata, Argentina, a resort city and fishing port on the country’s Atlantic coast within Buenos Aires Province. Yet, when he

was four years old, he moved with his family to New York's Greenwich Village and then Little Italy. It was a move that gave him his initial exposure to a broad range of music, helping foster what would become a lifelong passion for crossing stylistic boundaries and developing a kind of fusion that was very much his own.

Four for Tango is a 1988 work written for the Kronos Quartet. Edgy and dissonant, it evokes some of the gritty atmosphere of the bordellos of Buenos Aires where the tango was born. Mixed in as well are influences of Alberto Ginastera, Argentina's premiere composer, with whom Piazzolla studied composition and orchestration, not to mention echoes of Bartok, Stravinsky, and Ravel. And we can add hints of the signature tango sound of the bandoneon, an instrument of the accordion family. The score is replete with "advanced" string techniques, including multiple glissandos, percussive "sandpaper" effects, and "whips" that evoke the sharp kicks of the tango.

Samuel Barber (1910-1981) *Adagio for Strings, Op. 11*

Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings, Op. 11* is actually the slow movement of his first string quartet of 1936. Somehow it has taken on a life of its own in a version for string orchestra as the piece of choice at state funerals. Cases in point include those of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt in 1945 and Princess Grace (Kelly) of Monaco in 1982.

Nephew of the contralto Louise Homer, Samuel Barber had a brief early career performing in public as a baritone. A musical prodigy, he was admitted at age 14 to the newly founded Curtis Institute of Music in 1924. It was there that he studied piano with Isabelle Vengerova—a future teacher of Leonard Bernstein—composition with Rosario Scalero, and conducting with Fritz Reiner.

Broadly speaking, Barber's style is that of a modernist melodist with an unmistakably conservative streak; and the influence of the male voice is never very far behind. In fact, *Adagio for Strings* suggests the sound of a chant for voices, modal and otherworldly, with the polyphonic texture of the canon—a more sophisticated form of rounds like "Row, row, row your boat."

Antonin Dvořák (1841-1904) *String Quartet in F Major, Op. 96 ("American")*

The son of a village innkeeper and butcher, Antonin Dvořák came from humble stock. With a father who wanted his son to simply learn his trade, Antonin had little formal education beyond elementary school. And despite some early local recognition of his musical gifts, Antonin Dvořák, until his early thirties, had to eke out a living as a freelance violist and organist in Prague, playing in churches, dance bands, and the opera orchestra. But his life radically changed after he submitted his works in a competition for the Austrian State Stipendium—a prize offered to poor but worthy artists from the provinces of the empire. He actually won the prize on three separate occasions between 1875

and 1877. One of the judges on the adjudicating committee was none other than Johannes Brahms, who began to take a keen interest in Dvořák and strongly recommended him to his publisher, Fritz Simrock. Indeed, the subsequent publication of Dvořák's *Moravian Duets* and *Slavonic Dances* caught on like wildfire. He soon became an international sensation, with his music being performed in venues ranging from Moscow, Vienna, and London, to Cincinnati, Ohio. In addition, the years 1884 and 1885 included appearances in London. But even before he himself first came to England, performances of his *Stabat Mater* in 1883 proved tumultuously popular in a country immersed in the oratorio tradition.

Meanwhile movers and shakers in the United States were starting to take notice. The country was on the verge of celebrating its 400th anniversary in a burst of patriotic fervor. And no one was more important than Jeannette Meyers Thurber. She began courting Dvořák in early June 1891 and by the end of the year a deal had been sealed. Married to a grocery wholesaler-tycoon, she was able to commit vast resources to establishing and developing the National Conservatory of Music in New York. The institution was founded in 1885 and survived until the later 1920s, when funding issues and competition from other emerging schools led to its demise. It started life with a remarkably progressive inclusive mission: championing the rights of women, and admitting people of color as well as the handicapped, sometimes on full scholarship. And come they did. Enrollment grew from 84 students in 1885 to 3,000 in 1900. Dvořák's coming to serve as director from September 1892 to April 1895 and all the attendant publicity had much to do with it. Much credit also goes to his wife, Anna Dvořák, and her powers of persuasion, especially when she learned that her husband was being offered an annual salary of \$15,000—25 times his current income on the faculty of the Prague Conservatory.

The "American" on today's program has an innocent simplicity—a work that is disarming, honest, and colored with elemental rhythms and timbres. It was written during the summer of 1893, which Dvořák spent in the isolated Czech community of Spillville, Iowa. But the whole process of writing it needs to be placed in context. Dvořák went there that summer at the express suggestion of his amanuensis-secretary, Josef Kovarick. An America-born Czech, fluent in both English and the language of the Old Country, Kovarick not only lived with the Dvořák family, but also travelled with the composer almost every day.

Dvořák was charmed by Spillville, its Czech-American farmers, fauna, cattle, and the very present birds. Writing in one of his letters, he exclaimed: "I was walking in the woods by the stream and heard the singing of birds for the first time in eight months!" He had just escaped from a highly stressful situation in New York—a situation exacerbated by the prodding and manipulation of yellow journalists. Dvořák never developed real fluency in English, and "massaging" and outright distortion cannot be discounted in much of Dvořák's newspaper prose. Much of the furor was prompted by Dvořák's purported pronouncements about race and music—commentary centered around

his *Symphony No. 9* ("From the New World"). Among the most controversial statements:

In the negro melodies of America I discover all that is needed for a great and noble school of music. They are pathetic, tender, passionate, melancholy, solemn, religious, bold, merry, gay or what you will. It is music that suits itself to any mood or any purpose. There is nothing in the whole range of composition that cannot be supplied with themes from this source.

There is every indication that Dvořák found welcome relief in the congenial world of Spillville. "How beautifully the sun shines!" marveled the composer after completing the first movement of his "American" Quartet. In fact, the whole work was sketched out in three days shortly after his arrival. The first movement, a sonata form, opens with the murmuring of the two violins overlaying the principal pentatonic theme—think the black keys on the piano—announced by the viola—Dvořák's primary instrument. This theme is very shortly picked up by the first violin. The music unfolds with a contagious warmth and rhythmic ebullience before we arrive at the touching, lyrical second theme, one tinged with nostalgia.

Dvořák's second movement, in D minor, is a heart-rending lament filled with endless melodic pathos—a quality intensified by the persistent plangent and syncopated inner voices of second violin and viola. Passages of soft pizzicato round out the movement. The *Molto vivace* movement is filled with off-beat accents and evocations of a bird call. The movement has two contrasting interludes, both in A-flat. There is a five-part overall shape to this movement: A-B-A-B'-A.

The *Finale* is a modified sonata form, a masterpiece of deft construction of driving pentatonic elements, as well as slow interludes. But above all, this is music of unbridled joy—as if Dvořák is telling us he has found his true place among his Czech soulmates.

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Coming Up



The remainder of the 2025-2026 season

Ivalas Quartet

December 7, 2025

*Program includes Haydn,
Yuasa, Coleridge-Taylor, and Debussy*

Ying Quartet

March 15, 2026

*Program includes
Haydn, Childs, and Beethoven*

The Amerigo Trio with Lisa Eunsoo Kim

May 17, 2026

*Program includes
Beethoven, Dvořák, and Golijov*



